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## Nationalism and Globalization: Challenging Assumptions

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# Nationalism and Globalization: Challenging Assumptions

Jonathan Hearn

*This article challenges a set of common assumptions and misconceptions about nationalism and globalization. First, nationalism and globalization are historically entwined and reinforcing processes, and not fundamentally opposed to each other. Second—and closely related—the modern nation-state is premised on interdependence of economic and political forms of power, not their opposition. Third, nation-states are highly variable in their powers, resources, and alignments, and form an evolving system, making it difficult to say anything sensible about the “fate of the nation-state” in the abstract. Fourth, the variable composition of national identities and cultures is considerably more complex than a dichotomy between “ethnic” and “civic” types might suggest. Together, these arguments point toward the continuing need for an understanding of global processes as an outcome of the negotiation of powers between nation-states, not as autonomous shaping forces over and above nation-states.*

Discussions on nationalism and globalization frequently rely on an oversimplified opposition of these processes that fails to appreciate their complex interdependence. This introductory essay aims to challenge this assumption and several others as a way of setting the stage for a wide-ranging analysis of nationalism.

Nationalism theorists have tended to divide into two camps: those who emphasize its deep historical roots in various formations of ethnicity and polity, and those who see it primarily as a modern phenomenon, linked to the rise of mass politics, industrialization, and democratization.<sup>1</sup> If one accepts that nationalism is, at its base, the contemporary expression of pre-modern sentiments and identities, then it follows that it will be at odds with modern processes, including globalization. However, if one views it as an aspect of modernity itself, then this opposition becomes less plausible.

My first assertion is that while we can always find pre-modern factors feeding into the formation of nations, modern nationalism is a sufficiently distinctive phenomenon to deserve its own conceptualization. Although social groups that share overarching collective identities and make claims to rule themselves in particular territories have existed for millennia, modern nationalism adds two critical further ingredients. First, the spread of literacy and mass forms of communication have greatly extended and accelerated ideological processes.<sup>2</sup> Second, the belief that political legitimacy comes from below—from

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the people who are subject to that rule—only takes full shape in the modern age of democracy and other forms of mass politics. Nationalism, in the sense I use it here, is the making of combined claims to identity, territory, and jurisdiction,

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*Nationalism is the making of combined claims to identity, territory, and jurisdiction, under these specifically modern conditions of communication and legitimization.*

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tion, under these specifically modern conditions of communication and legitimization.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to nationalism, there is a tendency to conceptualize globalization in terms that are too historically

shallow. It is conventional to treat globalization as a very recent process, only taking off after World War II, and especially associated with the neoliberal turn since the 1970s, specifically with the growth of international finance and of various transnational quasi-governmental bodies (the UN, the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and so forth). It is often conceived in opposition to a mid-twentieth century paradigm of the more corporatist and Keynesian welfare state, and as a key factor in the decline of that paradigm. To the degree that we take that form of the state as emblematic of modern nationalism, globalization appears to be subsequent and opposed to it. But this is problematic, because nation-states are one of the basic preconditions and drivers of globalizing processes, not antecedents, and globalization was one of the conditions of the formation of modern nationalism in the first place. In fact, they are concomitant.

Nationalism and globalization are complex emergent processes that do not have simple origins. It is possible to identify many historical processes that prefigure them in some ways: ancient Israel and Greece for nationalism, the spread of the Roman Empire and various world religions for globalization.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, they are primarily modern processes, and their modern histories are deeply entwined. Liah Greenfeld argues that the origins of modern nationalism lie in class transformations of sixteenth-century England.<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson claims that nationalism first took shape among the Creole pioneers, European settlers in the colonies in the Americas.<sup>6</sup> Others have emphasized the competitive dynamic among dynastic and imperial states in Europe in the early modern period, raising demands for internal legitimization.<sup>7</sup> All these arguments have merit, but I argue that the spatial frame needs to be wider, and the temporal frame more specific.

The crucial, pivotal context for the formation of modern nationalism was the world of interactions around the North Atlantic in the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> With European colonization of the Americas and the growth of transatlantic trade networks, a new worldview evolved as European empires became overstretched and unable to maintain systems of rule. A transatlantic milieu of intellectuals, especially in the British American colonies and France, elaborated new ideas of democracy, republicanism, and collective self-rule that came to the forefront in the respective revolutions of 1776 and 1789.<sup>9</sup> In other words, modern nationalism was already substantially global in its origins, arising out of this transatlantic commercial context in the eighteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic at the same time, as part of one historical process of transformation.

Since then, in successive waves, the growth of capitalism around the globe has been closely tied to the spread of the nation-state form, first in the initial burst of republican revolutions in Europe and the Americas during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; then in the spread of European empires of trade, eventually replaced by an array of decolonizing states; and most recently in a wave of new states formed out of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As particularly powerful modern nation-states have also had explicit or implicit imperial ambitions, they have spread economic, political, and cultural practices, and spawned new nation-states in the face of resistance to their goals. These states, in various regional formations, have developed trade, political, and military alliances to protect and advance their interests, also contributing to the global extension of norms and institutions, while

at the same time further defining national communities of interest. Globalization is not a freestanding process, or even the specific project of multinational corporations along with other economic actors. It is the outcome of interactions among all kinds of organizational actors—economic, political, military, cultural, and ideological—as they try to pursue various interests in a crowded world.<sup>10</sup> And nation-states are foundational among these organizations.

Next, it is worth saying something more about the typical structure of the modern nation-state. As Max Weber observed, these are premised on the fundamental alliance between capital and the state.<sup>11</sup> States rely on complex economic organizations, corporations, banks, and so on, to support their legitimacy by supplying employment, tax bases, and sufficient prosperity to maintain social order. In turn, these organizations rely on the state to provide the necessary legal and administrative integration, including such essentials as stable contracts and currencies, in order to go about their business. Whatever the chronic tensions, the two are wedded to one another, and the modern state has this alliance at its core. Granted, in the twentieth century, command economy models tried to weld the economic and political forms of organization so tightly together that the distinction broke down, but this proved unsuccessful.

At the other, capitalist end of the spectrum, there is a range of possible degrees and manifestations of mutualism between the state and its core economic organizations, from the social democratic to the more economically liberal. But there is no reason to think the current “long leash” that many economic organizations enjoy under regimes more committed to market fundamentalism is a permanent state of affairs. The crucial role of states such as the United States and the United Kingdom in absorbing private debt and turning it into public debt in the wake of the 2007–2008 financial crisis is strong evidence of the enduring interdependence of the economic and political dimensions of the modern nation-state’s organization.

This has basic implications for the relationship between nationalism and globalization. While it is certainly the case that many local communities have found themselves at the mercy of footloose capital and weaker states have been

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strong-armed by powerful corporations, the power of the modern company dovetails with the power of modern states. The most powerful companies are generally housed in the most powerful states. From imperial gunboats supporting state-chartered trading organizations, to IMF- and World Bank-imposed structural adjustments prying open national markets, it is the combination of strong political and economic organizations in symbiotic action that has been the dominant agent of globalization.

This is not to deny that there are conflicts of interest between political and economic actors, or that the distributions of power between them can become unbalanced. Again, with the recent global economic downturn in mind, there is good reason to think that some economic firms have enjoyed too much autonomy. But it does call into question the inevitability of domination of the economic over the political, and the impotency of states in the face of global capitalism. This is not so much a matter of impotency as of deliberate inaction on the part of those states with the requisite power to act and shape the course of events. Those states are generally among the more established and stable democracies, so on some level their citizens must take responsibility for that inaction as well.

I have just alluded to my third line of argument. One of the liabilities of abstract theorizing about the “fate of the nation-state” is a tendency to treat nation-states as if they all approximated a single type, the fate of which was in question.<sup>12</sup> But nation-states come in a wide array of sizes, resource endowments, positioning within international alliances, and degrees of effective power.<sup>13</sup> It makes little sense to talk of the future of the nation-state in general; it makes more sense to address their variable fortunes according to the factors listed above. For instance, a significant factor stimulating speculation about national futures in Europe has been the growth of the European Union, which has appeared for many years to be assimilating sovereignty from its member states as it expanded, perhaps eroding national boundaries and self-determination. But as has been pointed out, the EEC and then the EU came about precisely to preserve the European states from mutual destruction and from external competition.<sup>14</sup> Currently, this political and economic project is under severe strain, as Greece and Europe’s other southern states struggle with unsustainable levels of debt and unemployment, which rebound on the rest of the system. They further struggle with the largest human migrations since the end of World War II out of Syria and parts of Africa, driven by a series of political, economic, and humanitarian crises. The one-directional historical movement toward greater integration is no longer so obvious, as various EU countries have shown resistance. Even if the EU weathers these storms and continues on its path of integration, it is not immediately obvious that this is a sign of the demise of the nation-state model so much as the formation of a new macro-polity with the geographic scale and cultural complexity of global contenders such as the United States and China.

My point here is that the pertinent unit of analysis is not the nation-state in the abstract, but the overall ecology of power among diverse and actual states. Only in this dimension can we see shifting chains of dependence and interdependence and the patterns of opposition that serve to sustain various

relationships, undermining autonomy in some respects, but reinforcing it in others. As long as there are multiple major global and regional power holding states, there will be multiple less powerful states aligning themselves with or between them. Although there are indeed global channels and places of mutual influence and impact, these do not yet form truly integrated political, economic, or normative systems. There is a “world society” in the limited sense of articulating networks of interactions and mutual adjustments, and to some degree this involves the spread of various kinds of conventions.<sup>15</sup> But there isn’t (yet) a stable and integrated system of power structures and policies, which would require something approaching “world government.”<sup>16</sup> As long as this is so, we need to be careful about overstating the case for globalization, and to distinguish between causal interactions in a complex world and the emergence of genuine systems of social life extending across the globe.

Up to this point, I have used a fairly open conception of the nation-state as a single political unit with enough cultural continuity to function, but without making any assumptions about the degree of cultural unity necessary to underpin nationalism. I take the view that this is highly variable. Some states operate with a high degree of cultural, linguistic, or religious uniformity, but others do not. Several liberal democracies have become strikingly multicultural in their composition. Despite anxieties in some quarters about this, the effect has not been to undermine national unity, but rather to reconstitute it in newer and better-adapted terms. Multiculturalism in this sense assumes, nonetheless, enough overarching cultural continuity to make the system work. This is the rejoinder to those who question whether the nation-state, understood as a close fit between a polity and a relatively uniform culture, ever really existed except for a few rare exceptions—perhaps Japan or Iceland.<sup>17</sup> Nation-states have always dealt with, and generated, internal cultural diversity, with our opening classic examples of the United States and France as cases in point. “Nation” in this general sense needs to be taken as sufficient to the tasks of modern political legitimization, not as a badge of cultural homogeneity. Otherwise, it could never deal with the diversity and change found in what we normally understand as the history of modern nation-states.

Another convention in the academic literature on nationalism is to talk in terms of a contrast between “ethnic” and “civic” forms of nationalism.<sup>18</sup> As just suggested, within limits, meaningful comparisons along a dimension can be made here, but we should disabuse ourselves of the notion of pure types. Membership in the most civic of nations is usually an accident of birth, not a choice, and civic identities and commitments are made concrete through patterns of symbols and other conventions, just as much as ethnic ones are.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, both Michael Mann and Jack Snyder have made a useful point about an intrinsic ambiguity in modern nationalism.<sup>20</sup> At its most basic, the doctrine of nationalism says “the people” should rule themselves, but for the reasons just given, it is not very clear who “the people” are. In some contexts, the people and their elites have constructed themselves more as a *demos*, which is relatively culturally open and has a direct hand in the business of rule. In others the people and their elites have constructed themselves more as an *Ethnos*: a cultural community whose interests are supposedly met when their political



leaders share the same culture as that community, but with little concern for the democratic control of power. In other words, the modern nation-state dis-

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*...the modern nation-state distinctively gets its legitimacy from below—from the mass of the ruled population—but how it secures that legitimacy... can vary in consequential and dangerous ways.*

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tinctively gets its legitimacy from below—from the mass of the ruled population—but how it secures that legitimacy, whether through democratic institutions or symbolic representations, can vary in consequential and dangerous ways.

Apart from this question of how ethnically or civically the nation is constituted, calls for greater cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious purity are a perennial form of political mobilization in the modern world. Often, these seem to represent resistance to the tides of globalization, to mobilize some groups against others in struggles over limited resources, or to shore up embattled local forms of legitimacy. But we need to distinguish carefully between nationalism as such and ethnic politics more generally. Nationalism, as I use it here, means the construction and consolidation of a collective identity either in pursuit of, or in association with the ongoing reproduction of, a self-governing state. Ethnic politics are organized around the interests of an ethnically defined group, but need not be concerned with the pursuit or consolidation of statehood.

Modern nation-states are full of ethnic politics, especially in ethnically diverse urban settings where ethnic interests become spatialized and canalized into specific economic sectors and activities, and groups encounter discrimination on the basis of cultural differences. But ethnic politics only head towards becoming nationalism when these issues can coalesce into a viable set of combined claims to identity, territory, and jurisdiction. There are ambiguous cases, such as Scotland in the United Kingdom, or Quebec in Canada, where the overarching state has granted (or conceded) an exceptional degree of self-government within that frame to culturally-defined territories, and in which pressures for greater autonomy continue. Michael Hechter has coined the term “governance units” to talk about these cases that are not quite states, but defined to a degree in terms of distinct territory and jurisdiction.<sup>21</sup>

The central thrust of my remarks is away from treating nationalism thinly, simply as culturally-marked political mobilization, and rather more thickly, as the historical accompaniment of the modern state, and of a world in which bids for statehood will continue. It is to question more exotic readings of nationalism as ethnic extremism and as political reaction, and to view it more as a normal part of modern politics—one we must own and take responsibility for. Nationalism and national identities are unlikely to go away any time soon. We are inclined to be untroubled by those versions that we take for granted. Nation-states and nationalisms need to be recognized as basic compositional factors in the globalization process, shaping interests, worldviews, and social conflicts. The practical, global political question is not whether we can get past them, but rather how we negotiate between them, and how they are linked to,



and interact with, the various forms of organized political and economic power that constitute the process of globalization.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origin of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); John Breuilly, "The State and Nationalism," in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 32–52; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin and Spread Of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Hearn, *Rethinking Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11–13.

<sup>4</sup> Göran Therborn, "Globalizations: Dimensions, Historical Waves, Regional Effects, Normative Governance," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 151–179.

<sup>5</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 47–65.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 450–99; Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Hearn, "The Origins of Modern Nationalism in the North Atlantic Interaction Sphere," *Sociological Research Online* 14, no. 5 (2009).

<sup>9</sup> Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 4: *Globalizations, 1945–2011* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–12.

<sup>11</sup> Max Weber, *General Economic History* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publication, Inc., 1927), 337.

<sup>12</sup> David Held, "The Decline of the Nation State," in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Michel Seymour, ed., *The Fate of the Nation State* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman and T. V. Paul, "Globalization and the National Security State: A Framework for Analysis," *International Studies Review* 7 (2005): 199–227.

<sup>14</sup> Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> John W. Meyer, "World Society, Institutional Theories, and the Actor," *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 1–20.

<sup>16</sup> Luis Cabrera, "Review article: World government: Renewed debate, persistent challenges," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 3 (2010): 511–530.

<sup>17</sup> Walker Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic group, is a . . .," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 4 (1978): 377–400.

<sup>18</sup> John Plamenatz, "Two Types of Nationalism," in *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea*, ed. Eugene Kamenka (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), 22–36.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Yack, "The Myth of the Civic Nation," *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society* 10, no. 2 (1996): 193–211.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000), 24; Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55–69.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9–10.